

Benjamin Lewis Whitehead and Elizabeth Thompson

Introduction

Benjamin Lewis Whitehead was one of the rare Unionists in Howard County at the outbreak of the Civil War. He established a school and a Methodist church dedicated to the Union. This public support for the Union attracted the attention of guerrilla leader “Bloody” Bill Anderson, who became determined to punish Whitehead. Anderson is quoted in the reminiscences of Whitehead’s cousin, Elizabeth Thompson, saying, “I’ll hound him and make an example of him” and “We’ll show them it ain’t just niggers we whip—it’s the niggers’ white friends.” It is unclear why Anderson felt that Benjamin Whitehead, a slave owner, was a friend of African Americans.

Event

By October 1864 Anderson had begun coming to the Whitehead home looking for Ben. On one of these occasions Ben hid in an upstairs closet while his wife answered the door. Upon meeting Anderson at the front door she told him her husband was not home. In response to this news Anderson shot into the ceiling and rode off. He did not realize that the man he was seeking was directly above him, and had been grazed by his bullet.

A few days later Anderson found Whitehead. He dragged him out of bed and forced him to walk half a mile on his hands and knees. He then demanded payment of \$10,000. Since he had no money on hand and the bank was closed, his slave Zeb and a “friendly neighbor” went to the president of the local bank for help. The president, unable or unwilling to provide the money, sent them to Whitehead’s cousin Elizabeth Thompson to find the money. Meanwhile Whitehead remained a hostage. When they arrived at Thompson’s she was only able to come up with \$7,000. They took this amount to Anderson who, after some protest, accepted it.

He was not done with Whitehead, however, as Elizabeth Thompson’s reminiscence described “one last act of cruelty remained.... He seized Mr. Whitehead by the feet and lifting him up, banged his head again and again on the floor.... an abscess developed.” Whitehead would eventually die from the injuries inflicted upon him that day.